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The Weird, the Posthuman, and the Abjected World-in-Itself: Fidelity to the ‘Lovecraft Event’ in the work of Caitlín R. Kiernan and Laird Barron

Caitlín R. Kiernan and Laird Barron are acclaimed and influential writers of the early twenty-first-century resurgence of weird fiction. But a common critical response to their writing is that they have achieved their powerful effects only by transcending the influence of the work of H.P. Lovecraft. This article argues: that, while it is important to move past Lovecraft’s often regressive stance, to inherit topoi from him is not necessarily to take on the more negative aspects of his personal ideology; that, though his ideology was reactionary, aspects of his poetics were radical and progressive; and that he himself, in fact, derived many of his tropes from earlier writers whose worldviews differed radically from his – that the topoi were not formed by his ideology. Kiernan and Barron have used these topoi to address contemporary concerns in a progressive manner maintaining fidelity to what Ben Noys has called the ‘Lovecraft event’, while breaking with his reactionary attitudes.

Keywords

Lovecraft Kiernan Barron Weird Tropes Topoi

In his paper, 'The Lovecraft "Event"' (2007), Ben Noys argues that, though many of H.P. Lovecraft's attitudes and much of his ideology was regressive, his work has a radical quality, a 'jouissance'.¹ His claim is that Lovecraft's fiction engenders horror by 'forc[ing] a pass through the avant-gardes of his time, in both art and science,'² to bring about its 'malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.'³ This gives rise to the 'emergence of a new ontology (or pseudo-ontology) of nature as chaotic,' and produces not just a "reactionary novelty," but actually also a true novelty of disruption.⁴ The work creates its own rupture, what Noys terms the 'Lovecraft event'.⁵

Noys claims that, 'it is only beyond the Gothic, beyond the horror field and beyond his epigones that the "Lovecraft event" has actually been registered,' that only writers outside the genre have maintained fidelity to the 'Lovecraft event', made revolutionary use of his themes and tropes, 'writers like William Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, and Michel Houellebecq.'⁶ However, while there has indeed been much retrograde replication of Lovecraftian tropes in horror fiction, the twenty-first century revival of interest in the Gothic subgenre of weird fiction, a mode whose existence owes much to Lovecraft's fiction and criticism, has seen writers within the field exploiting the radical potential of some of Lovecraft's topoi. This fidelity to the Lovecraftian rupture in fiction of the weird revival has been obscured by a commendable reaction against the racism and misogyny present in Lovecraft's work. Caitlín R. Kiernan and Laird Barron are two writers of the weird whose work inherits many of Lovecraft's tropes. This is noted, sometimes with the implication of conservatism, sometimes with the sense that their work only succeeds where it goes beyond or rejects that legacy. In fact, both of these authors make radical and progressive use of that which they take from Lovecraft.

As James Machin has argued in his thesis, *'Determined to be Weird': British Weird Fiction before Weird Tales* (2016), by the second decade of the twenty-first century, 'weird fiction seemed to be making its presence felt across scholarship, publishing, and wider culture to an unprecedented degree.'⁷ The preceding decade had seen several key practitioners (including Lovecraft) of what China Miéville has termed the 'Haute Weird'⁸ era of 1880 to 1940 (a periodization he derives from the focus of S.T. Joshi's study *The Weird Tale* (1990)), granted canonical status by the publication of their work on imprints celebrating literary classics. There were also numerous anthologies dedicated to weird fiction and an upsurge in academic writing on the mode. This rekindling of interest represented a return of the Weird from cultural margins; after the period of the Haute Weird, it largely dropped away, much of its energy dissipated in conservative horror.

Of the early twenty-first century anthologies which attempt to construct a canon of weird fiction, perhaps the most prominent is 2011's *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, edited by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. This collection draws in diverse strands of Gothic, but, as the VanderMeers acknowledge in their introduction, much of the most recent work included owes at least a partial debt to Lovecraft:

Late period examples [of *The Weird*] demonstrate an intimate knowledge of both the Kafka and Lovecraft strands of weird fiction, but recombined in strange and exciting new ways.⁹

In spite of this sense of excitement, however, it is hard to escape the suggestion that the work that cleaves closest to the topoi of the Haute Weird, which arguably reached its apotheosis in Lovecraft's work, is tarnished by, at best, a backward-looking conservatism, and, at worst, by the darker aspects of Lovecraft's personal ideology. As the popularity of Jeff VanderMeer's

influential article of 2012, 'Moving Past Lovecraft',¹⁰ makes clear, it is seen as important by many progressive writers that the field escape the Lovecraft influence – indeed, since the 2016, the prestigious World Fantasy Award trophy has no longer been a bust of Lovecraft as it had since its inception in 1975.¹¹

Kiernan and Barron are both acclaimed and influential writers of the weird resurgence, but a common critical response to their writing is that they have achieved their powerful effects only by transcending a Lovecraft inheritance. In the brief biography that prefaces Kiernan's story in *The Weird*, she is described as 'an American author who has steadily moved beyond her reputation as an heir to the legacy of H.P Lovecraft [...] to become one of the most original and audacious weird writers of her generation.'¹² Yet the story of hers that features in *The Weird*, 'A Redress for Andromeda' (2000), while original and audacious, also actively engages with and reformulates Lovecraftian tropes.¹³ And Barron's story in the volume is introduced as follows: 'In his fiction, the influence of Lovecraft [...] has been subsumed by his own themes and concerns, creating such potent and original modern takes on the weird tale as "The Forest".'¹⁴ But 'The Forest' (2007) makes explicit use of topoi from Lovecraft, and, while the VanderMeers are right to say Barron's take is potent and original, Lovecraftian themes and tropes have been inverted or distorted, rather than subsumed.

The stance taken by Jeff VanderMeer and others against the intolerance represented by many of Lovecraft's views is laudable and important, and has done much good. Indeed, without it, it is possible that the progressive voices in the weird mode, especially those in the part of the field most influenced by the pulp magazine era of weird fiction of the 1920s and '30s, of which Lovecraft was a key voice, would have been inaudible over the reactionary ones. However, this position elides the fact that to inherit topoi from Lovecraft is not necessarily to take on the more negative and reactionary aspects of his personal beliefs. Lovecraft himself, in fact, derived many motifs from earlier writers whose worldviews

differed greatly from his. And, while it is a truism that form and content cannot be entirely sundered, it is also, to return to Noys's argument, entirely possible for radical and progressive poetics to be paired with, and indeed arise from, reactionary ideologies.

Rather than transcending or subsuming the influence of Lovecraft, Kiernan and Barron are engaged in what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term, in their work together, 'becoming'.¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari argue that the world is in a state of constant flux and characterised by transformation. A becoming is a transformation from one state to another. But a becoming is always a 'becoming-Other'. It does not proceed by resemblance, is not part of a rational order. It is not teleological, it does not tend towards apotheosis. Kiernan and Barron are becoming-Other than Lovecraft, by taking on and transforming his tropes, just as he took those topoi from earlier writers and radically refashioned and combined them.¹⁶

This article will focus on two core Lovecraftian tropes, that can be traced from his influences, through his use of them, to the ways they are exploited and revived in progressive ways in short stories by Kiernan and Barron: degeneration, and the blurring of boundaries between science and the occult.

Degeneration was a key topos of the fiction of the *fin de siècle*, a period Lovecraft was much influenced by. It can be found in the work of writers such as Arthur Machen, whom Lovecraft greatly admired, and H.G. Wells. The *fin de siècle* obsession with degeneration arose from anxieties that society had grown decadent and might be in decline, and also from the idea of reversion, the notion, derived from evolutionary theories, that if organisms could develop they could also devolve.

Lovecraft was obsessed by hereditary decay. The trope of degeneration was a central element of his oeuvre. As Brian Stableford notes in his *Glorious Perversity* (1998), 'Lovecraft made extravagant, if belated, use of such Decadent tropes as hereditary degeneracy, ultimately formulating a strange cosmic perspective which made such

degeneracy a condition of the universe.’¹⁷ In stories such as ‘The Lurking Fear’ (1923), ‘The Rats in the Walls’ (1924), and ‘The Horror at Red Hook’ (1927), somewhat contradictorily, both miscegenation and inbreeding are seen as leading to brute reversion.

But there is also a strange component of ecstasy in Lovecraft’s depictions of degeneration. This can perhaps be seen most clearly in the conclusion to ‘The Shadow Over Innsmouth’ (1936), when the narrator, looking in the mirror, observes that he has acquired the Innsmouth look, indicative of an inheritance of breeding between his ancestors and the ichthyic Deep Ones, and feels exaltation about joining his kin in the black abysses of the deep ocean:

I shall plan my cousin’s escape from that Canton madhouse, and together we shall go to marvel-shadowed Innsmouth. We shall swim out to that brooding reef in the sea and dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many-columned Y’hanthlei, and in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory for ever.¹⁸

This suggestion of ecstasy is picked up in Kiernan’s work. She makes transgressive use of the potential for transformation that is implied by Lovecraft’s cosmic perspective.¹⁹

In her story, ‘Houses Under the Sea’ (2003), the narrator, a journalist and alcoholic, tells of his relationship with Jacova Angevine, a disgraced academic, author, and finally leader of a cult called the Open Door of Night, who leads her followers into the sea. At the heart of the story is the narrator’s account of a video of some footage recorded by a remotely operated submersible, shot on the day before the mass suicide of the cult, in an ocean trench, almost two miles below the surface. This footage at first shows strange carvings on rocks down in the abyss. Then the face of Angevine appears in shot. In the footage:

She opens her eyes, and they are not her eyes, but the eyes of some marine creature adapted to that perpetual night. The soulless eyes of an angler fish or gulper eel, eyes like matching pools of ink, and something darts from her parted lips – ²⁰

Angevine has reverted, returned to the sea. But she has also transformed, and this exerts a strong pull on the narrator. He regrets not walking into the ocean with the cult, dreams of Angevine returning to him, and tempting him – ““Down there,” Jacova whispers, “you will know nothing but peace, in her mansions, in the endless night of her coils,”” – and writes that, were it not a dream, ‘I’d go with her, like a flash I’d go.’²¹

But the narrator is also frightened and revolted by the possibility of transformation. He describes the idol worshipped by the Open Door of Night as repugnant:

I thought of the thing from the altar, Jacova’s Mother Hydra, that corrupt and bloated Madonna of the abyss, its tentacles and anemone tendrils and black, bulging squid eyes, the tubeworm proboscis snaking from one of the holes where its face should have been.²²

But a strong sense is conveyed by the story that, could we only escape the narrator’s narrow perspective, we would truly see the thrill of change. The transformation Angevine undergoes resembles the becoming-Other of Deleuze and Guattari. As discussed, becoming-Other does not tend towards an ultimate realization. But it is *life*, where stasis is *death*. In ‘Houses Under the Sea’, a change which is largely figured as degenerate and abominable in Lovecraft’s work, becomes transcendent. As Angevine says to the narrator: ‘The divine is always abominable.’²³

A key figure to becoming, to transmutation, in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s work, is the ‘anomalous’. The anomalous has an allure that tempts across boundaries, it is a ‘phenomenon

of bordering.’²⁴ The anomalous is a member of a pack or multiplicity, or a ‘political’ structure, not something from outside, something radically Other, but ~~outside-it~~ has always been marked off, separated, as leader, loner, or banished. Much like Jacova Angevine in ‘Houses Under the Sea’. The amorphous form of Jacova’s Mother Hydra, which the narrator finds so vile, might be read not as a symptom of degeneration, but of becoming.²⁵ Or rather, as a symptom of the ecstatic becoming that always lurks within degeneration.²⁶

The elision of science and the occult was another key theme in Western literature of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The era saw dramatic shifts in the nature of science and the cosmology it implied. John A. Lester describes in his *Journey Through Despair 1880-1914* (1968) how, as the end of the nineteenth century approached, the cold rationality of positivist scientific discourse replaced the humanistic Enlightenment tradition of ‘reason’. But then other branches of science began to erode positivism’s clear confidence in rationality and the empirical method; it was overturned even as it achieved ascendance. As Lester puts it, ‘the nature of science and the world it revealed were radically changing.’²⁷ While, in most areas of culture, fidelity to the rational tenets of the Enlightenment was maintained, a new paradigm arose in the most abstract areas of thought: mathematics, philosophy, and cosmology. These new paradigms eroded some of the certainties of positivist science and empiricism, and were effectively occulted – deemed crypto-discourses, they were largely hidden from plain sight. The period also saw an increase in the scientific study of the supernatural. And some of those disenchanted with materialist empiricism and scientific positivism turned to occultism.

The topos of a collapsed occult/science binary arose from this context. It can be seen in the work of William Hope Hodgson, especially in his tales of the psychic detective, Thomas Carnacki, who uses contemporary science to explain and overcome supernatural phenomenon. It can also be found in Machen’s writings. In Machen’s work, there is a residue

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DOES THIS MAKE MORE SENSE OF THIS CONCEPT?

of the true numinous in which the penetralia of the world are only accessible to the properly prepared hierophant – not the neophyte. For Machen, the scientific study of the supernatural threatened transcendent truths; as Roger Luckhurst notes in his *The Invention of Telepathy* (2002), the idea of a scientific basis to hermetic phenomena, ‘at once legitimizes but also democratizes the “hidden”’: ‘This threatened [Machen’s] belief in visionary access to “the old faith ... of secret and beautiful and hidden mysteries gifted only to the few.”’²⁸

Lovecraft’s worldview was very different from both Hodgson’s and Machen’s and this shifts the trope. In Lovecraft’s fiction, there is neither an embrace of science, nor a turning away from it to the numinous: science cannot act as a defence against dread outer things, and there is no transcendence, nothing beyond, whether ecstatic or terrible. Lovecraft’s cosmos is bleak, nihilistic, indifferent to human life. The monsters of his tales are utterly alien, Other, but they are material, not supernatural. Abstract science and the occult have collapsed into one another, and this is terrible. Enamoured of the certainties of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, and an atheist, Lovecraft saw both quantum physics, non-Euclidean and Riemannian geometry, and so on, and the resurgence of a serious interest in the supernatural as anathema. He portrayed their combination as deleterious. At the opening of ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’ (1933), he outlines its effect on the story’s protagonist, Gilman:

Possibly Gilman ought not to have studied so hard. Non-Euclidean calculus and quantum physics are enough to stretch any brain; and when one mixes them with folklore, and tries to trace a strange background of multi-dimensional reality behind the ghoulish hints of the Gothic tales and the wild whispers of the chimney-corner, one can hardly expect to be wholly free from mental tension.²⁹

Lovecraft elided contemporary scientific and occult discourses in an approach that combined the Gothic with a kind of inversion of the scientific romance – a horror of, rather than delight in, the suggestions of new paradigms. Advanced mathematics and science were melded with the supernatural, and the effect was an assault on psychic well-being. And physical well-being, for in ‘The Dreams in the Witch House’ Gilman ends up with his heart gnawed out by the witch’s familiar.

In Laird Barron’s story ‘The Forest’ (2007), the nebulousness of the division between abstract scientific discourses and the occult is a key theme. The tale tells of the reunion of the protagonist, Richard Jefferson Partridge, a filmmaker, with some former associates, the zoologist Toshi Ryoko and his crew, at an old New England estate. Ryoko has enigmatically summoned Partridge to ‘say goodbye and good luck.’³⁰ Among those living with Ryoko in the ancestral manor is Nadine Thompson, a physiologist and sometime lover of Partridge’s. The human side of the story comes from Partridge’s and Nadine’s fraught romantic history, and the fact Nadine is dying of cancer. The weird element arises from the world of science: Toshi’s most recent studies having led to his communing with a hyperintelligent subterranean insect colony.³¹

As a figure Toshi blurs the boundaries between science and the occult: he engages with hermetic discourses as much as with scientific ones: ‘astrobiology, crypto zoology, the occulted world.’³² In ‘The Forest’, the collapse of the science/occult binary elicits horror. When Partridge first encounters some artefacts based on designs passed to Toshi by the insects, his response is visceral disgust:

Then, as they ambled along a fence holding back the wasteland beyond the barn, he spotted a cluster of three satellite dishes. The dishes’ antennas were angled downward at a sizable oblong depression like aardvark snouts poised to siphon musty earth [...] These

objects gleamed the yellow-gray gleam of rotting teeth. His skin crawled as he studied them and the area of crushed soil. The depression was over a foot deep and shaped not unlike a kiddy wading pool.³³

These devices are repellent, their purpose is obscure, satellite dishes pointed, not at the sky, but at the ground. Traditional scientific focus has been inverted, no longer out, into the universe, but in, on the occulted world.

And the feature they are apparently monitoring is in the form of a fairy ring. This evokes a figure which can be found in many fictions of the Haute Weird period, one strongly related to the blurring of boundaries between science and the occult: the technological magic circle. Eugene Thacker, in his *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011), explores this figure in relation to the philosophy of the occult, the knowledge of hidden things. One of his key texts is Lovecraft's 'From Beyond' (1934).

This story tells how a scientist, Crawford Tillinghast, perfects a device that awakes the dormant sensory capabilities of the pineal gland and allows people to perceive an eldritch place that inhabits the same space as our own familiar world. But not just to perceive – the device allows for interaction between that other world and our mundane reality and allows Tillinghast to set dread things from that place on people he believes have wronged him.

In Tillinghast's device, Thacker sees an inversion of the traditional function of the magic circle – it calls the weird, rather than offers protection from it. This is also true of earlier weird examples such as the spectrum 'defense' of Hodgson's occult detective Carnacki, seen in the story 'The Hog' (1947, but written prior to Hodgson's death in 1918). But in Lovecraft's tale Thacker notes two additional transformations. The first is that science and technology do not boost the signal of a traditional magic circle, as in Carnacki's spectrum 'defense', but rather they are the circle: 'Lovecraft discards the architectonics of the magic

circle, but keeps the metaphysics.’³⁴ The second is ‘the disappearance of the circle itself, while its powers still remain in effect.’³⁵ There is now no inside or outside, ‘[t]he center of the circle is, then, really everywhere ... and its circumference, really nowhere.’³⁶ Thacker argues that, in Lovecraft, ‘not only is there no distinction between the natural and supernatural, but that what we sloppily call “supernatural” is simply another kind of nature, but one that lies beyond human comprehension – not in a relative but in an absolute sense.’³⁷ The barriers have been broken down. This is the very basis of ‘cosmic horror’: ‘the paradoxical realization of the world’s hiddenness as an absolute hiddenness.’³⁸

The topos of the elision of science and the occult has much to do with borders and their transgression. One feature that could be said to distinguish weird tales from more conventional horror fiction, is its treatment of boundaries. The Gothic in general is a mode concerned with borders. As David Punter has argued:

[T]he Gothic has defined itself on the borderland of [bourgeois] culture. Sometimes [...] fear of the outside in the end submits to the reassurance of contact with the interior; elsewhere the dark predominates, and the bourgeoisie loses the imaginary battles which Gothic acts out.³⁹

Unlike horror, that other offshoot of the Gothic, the weird always falls on the side of the dark predominating, and never on the side of boundaries being reinscribed and the Other being kept out, though often in ways that are profoundly ambiguous. One of the ways the weird tale does this is through the trope of something which is intended to function as a barrier becoming a place of passage. The distortion of that occult staple, the magic circle, such that it becomes both technological and a portal, enabling the irruption of the weird, is therefore a metonym for the operations of the Weird.

This notion also returns us to the transformative ecstasies of Kiernan's work, for the anomalous is, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, a 'phenomenon of bordering'. 'The Dandridge Cycle', which includes 'A Redress for Andromeda' and two tales which tell its backstory, 'Nor the Demons Down Under the Sea' (2002) and 'Andromeda Among the Stones' (2003), is all about borders, about a house built over a portal to some dark other place, and a woman, who through her degeneration, through being halfway between land and sea, human and marine life, acts as a bulwark and sacrifice (as allusions to the classical myth of Andromeda in the stories' titles show), but also a draw, an allure. And, at the end of 'Houses Under the Sea', referring to a half-remembered Joseph Campbell quote, the narrator writes: 'I would go with her, because, like a stone that has become an incarnation of mystery, she has drawn a circle around me.'⁴⁰ Here the figure of a circle inscribed round an object, something often associated with a kind of warding, becomes a figure for something that forces a passage across the border to the Weird.

In 'The Forest', when Partridge asks about the satellite dishes, Toshi explains they are: 'A link in the chain. We've got miles of conductive coil buried around here. All part of a comprehensive surveillance plexus. We monitor everything that crawls, swims or flies.'⁴¹ In effect, the equipment forms a kind of vast technological magic circle, one whose purpose is to monitor, but also to communicate and summon. Subsequently, Toshi's partner, Howard Campbell, tells Partridge the dishes are devices for picking up broadcasts from the hyperintelligent insects, devices which, though crude, are 'superior to the primitive methods – scrying, séances, psychedelic drugs, that nonsense.'⁴² Technology here replaces hermetic rites and is used to an occult end.

Later in the tale, Partridge is made to enter a weird node, which appears to be a device for experiencing transmissions from the insect colony:

It was strange whatever lay before him. Something curved, spiral-shaped and darkly wet. A horn, a giant conch shell, it was impossible to be certain. There was an opening, as the *external os* of a cervix, large enough to accommodate him in all his lanky height. Inside it was moist and muffled and black.⁴³

Inside, he has a vision of a future world colonised by the monstrous insect intelligence, dominated by their ‘colossal, inhuman edifices of fossil bone and obsidian and anthracite that glittered not unlike behemoth carapaces,’⁴⁴ the only men and women there puppets or avatars of the insects. But the node is a conventional magic circle, ‘a window, not a doorway,’⁴⁵ and Partridge doesn’t pass through, enter the hidden world. Further, Partridge, who is drunk and perhaps drugged by the others when he experiences his vision, cannot recall it: ‘His memory was a smooth and frictionless void.’⁴⁶ The occulted is glimpsed, but forgotten.

John Clute, in his *The Darkening Garden* (2006), calls this kind of vision, the revelation of the underlying truth that the cosmos is inimical to life, ‘Vastation’. To experience Vastation is to ‘experience the malice of the made or revealed cosmos.’⁴⁷ Clute argues that the moment of Vastation is always the ultimate moment of the horror tales in which it occurs, a fatal impediment to further narration: ‘after Vastation, the utterands of Story, and Story itself, falls into dead silence: for there is no way to proceed.’⁴⁸ Barron’s technique in ‘The Forest’ is to enable narration to continue by allowing Partridge, and with him the reader, to experience Vastation, the vision of the future of earth as a planet inimical to all but insect life and a few human puppets, but only to see it, not to pass over, and further to experience it in a stupor and forget it.

Or almost forget: ‘Moths fluttered near his face, battered at the windows and Partridge wondered why that panicked him, why his heart surged and his fingernails dug into the arm rests.’⁴⁹ Clute notes that in horror fiction such a loss of identity is ‘normally terminal,’ a

prelude to 'the evacuation of the protagonist's self into nothingness or death.'⁵⁰ But Partridge's identity loss doesn't mark release, however fatal; having nearly obliterated the revelation of Vastation in fugue, Partridge, and the reader, can be made to experience it again. Having forgotten his terrible vision, Partridge must suffer further dread revelations. The vision of the occulted world is doubled and emphasized.

At one point in the story, Partridge thinks to himself: '*The brain is a camera and once it sees what it sees there's no taking it back.*'⁵¹ But in the world of Barron's story, empiricism has long been left behind. The truth of the world is hidden, not accessible to sight, and anyway the brain is an unreliable recording device.

But the hidden world is made present, just as it was in Lovecraft 'From Beyond'. Later in 'The Forest', Partridge returns to the fairy ring, or to another 'shallow depression where the grass had been trampled or had sunk beneath the surface,' with Nadine.⁵² They lie down together in lust. They begin to sink into the bare earth, then the insects come to devour Nadine: '**a tide of chirring and burring and click-clacking blackness poured into the depression from the far-flung expanses of lost pasture and haunted wilderness, from the moist abyssal womb that opens beneath everything, everywhere.**'⁵³ The hidden world that is hinted at by the collapse of the distinction between the rational and the supernatural is linked to the undifferentiated condition of the womb (recall that the node that allows Partridge a vision of the future insect world has an opening like 'the *external os* of a cervix'). This undifferentiated condition is that of the human before the individual psyche is developed, when consciousness is just tide of blackness and din. Nadine crosses over, or returns, to this condition; as Toshi explains to Partridge, she is one who has been chosen to 'relinquish his or her flesh to the appetites of the colony and exist among them in a state of pure consciousness [...] become undying repositories of our civilization ... a civilization that shall become ancient history one day very soon.'⁵⁴ The magic circle has become one that allows passage to

the occulted world, and this passage confronts us with the abject, with that horde of being that, in the development of an individual, precedes the formation of (the illusion of) a single unified consciousness, all the selves rejected in order that we might take on the one self we become in order to fit in with the social order. The occulted world is abject: cast off, but waiting, baleful, to return. As Julia Kristeva argues in her *Powers of Horror* (1980), abjection offers no easy reassurances, ‘while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.’⁵⁵ The past, the insect hordes, cannot simply be put aside. They will return in triumph.

There is another way of looking at Nadine’s transmutation, as a ‘becoming-abject’, as what Deleuze and Guattari would term a ‘becoming-insect’, or indeed, a ‘becoming-molecular’. It is a line of flight: escape from stratification, escape from her fraught love affair with Partridge, from the cancer that will kill her, from death, from the grief of Partridge, Toshi, and the others, from the fall of human civilization. But Nadine’s flight is aggressively shut down, in Deleuzian terms, ‘re-territorialized’, as she is assimilated by ‘the citizens of the Great Kingdom,’ becoming merely an archive in the insect colony’s museum of culture, an ‘undying reposit[or]y’.⁵⁶ ‘The Forest’ is a story suspicious of transmutation. But not in the reactionary way characteristic of the early Weird, and Lovecraft in particular, but a way that emphasizes the human. The reaction is not for the strict orders of Enlightenment taxonomy, as it is in Lovecraft’s work: the archivist insects of ‘The Forest’ are monstrous and baleful in their attempts to preserve and categorise the cultures of other organisms. The reaction is for the messy contingency of human life, for Partridge’s and Nadine’s broken love affair.

Having had the occulted world revealed to him, Partridge tries to shut out its visible aspect, the face it shows: ‘He reached up and pulled the shade down tight against the sill and it was dark.’⁵⁷ But the reader senses that this vision can never been unseen.

Clute argues that in *Vastation*, horror fiction offers a sight of the world as it truly is, riven, damaged by man's rapaciousness and misuse.⁵⁸ Thacker makes a similar claim, arguing that horror fiction offers a vision of what he calls the 'world-without-us'. The world-without-us lies between the human experience of the world and the 'world-in-itself', the inhuman world which is intimated by natural disasters and the threat of ecological catastrophe, but is ultimately unthinkable. The world-without-us, the idea of the world without humankind, is just thinkable, because in it humankind is quasi-present in its absence. It offers a means of approaching the unthinkable world-in-itself, an important project as we continue to depredate the earth.⁵⁹

'The Forest' offers prophecies and, finally, a vision of the world-without-us. At one point Toshi claims that, even if humankind can rein in its appetite for self-destruction, and avoid a natural catastrophe, the cooling of the sun will finish us: 'Assuming we don't obliterate ourselves, or that a meteorite doesn't smack us back to the Cambrian, if not the Cryptozoic, this planet will succumb to the exhaustion of Sol.'⁶⁰

Thacker argues that the only rational philosophical position to adopt when faced with 'the difficult thought of the world as absolutely unhuman, and indifferent to the hopes, desires, and struggles of human individuals and groups,' is 'a strange mysticism of the world-without-us, a hermeticism of the abyss, a noumenal occultism.'⁶¹ This is a position of acceptance, a 'Cosmic Pessimism'. Thacker identifies this Cosmic Pessimism in fiction of Lovecraft and his acolytes. It is a vision, that in its most extreme expression, results in the position held by Thomas Ligotti, which he expresses in his treatise, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2010), that consciousness is a curse and that humankind should seek its own termination.⁶² Barron's ethic is quite different. In 'The Forest', the 'difficult thought' of the world-without-us is used in a similar manner to the way Friedrich Nietzsche uses the idea of the eternal return, 'the greatest weight': as a kind of affirmation.⁶³

Commented [JM2]: Genuine query rather than disagreement – is 'aberration' the correct term here? My memory is that Ligotti takes Zapffe's line that consciousness is a sort of 'cursed' by-product of our higher development, that it secured an evolutionary advantage for humans at the cost of inflicting misery on us as cognizant of the futility of the existence it helps secure. Or something. THAT'S QUITE RIGHT – I WAS OVER SIMPLIFYING – IS THIS BETTER – LIGOTTI DOES FOLLOW ZAPFFE IN CALLING CONSCIOUSNESS A BLUNDER AND A CURSE...

Barron's position is a sort of cosmic optimism. Faced with the horror of the cosmos, we should seek to cling to those things and those people that make life worth living. to human life in all its raw chaos. We should cling to hope.

So it can be seen that though Lovecraft's themes and topoi might seem very specific to his era, and also tainted by his reactionary ethic, they return in works of early twenty-first century weird fiction, where they are used to address other concerns, and in a progressive manner. Writers such as Kiernan and Barron who do this are not moving past Lovecraft and his precursors so much as using aspects of their work in ways that emphasize radical potentials implicit even in the most regressive fictions of the Haute Weird.

Noys argues that one way in which Lovecraft's reactionary fiction has been 'recouped' is by the embracing of those moments of ecstasy in which transformation, chaos, and the beyond appear desirable, the reading of them as positive in terms of social shifts towards the posthuman: 'The new valorisation of the body and the chaotic marks a shift towards what we could call the optimistic reading of Lovecraft.'⁶⁴ But he also problematizes this stance, arguing that Lovecraft's horror of chaos was 'not simply a rejection of hybridity, femininity, and new perceptual modes, but also the rejection of new forms of dominance that take on a chaotic form – the lure of "amusement value" as promised realisation of jouissance.'⁶⁵ Lovecraft's reaction can be seen as one against rapid social and technological change and its estranging effect on the individual, and also as a reaction against free-market capital, which exploits chaos and transmutation. So, Noys argues, a true fidelity to the 'Lovecraft Event' would involve a measure of rejection of chaos and embrace of Lovecraft's reactionary position. However, it would also 'seemingly paradoxically,' require the welcoming of 'the destabilisation of "hyper-chaos" [Quentin Meillassoux's term for the absolute chaos beyond order] in terms of reality or ontology.'⁶⁶

Commented [JM3]: Sorry to be annoying, but this feels like it comes out of nowhere a bit... how is Barron's position optimistic? THIS IS IN REFERENCE TO THE REACTION TO THE MESSY CONTINGENCY OF HUMAN LIFE, MENTIONED EARLIER – BUT I CAN SEE IT'S UNCLEAR – I'VE TRIED TO CLARIFY.

Commented [JM4]: Thought: this is Camus/Sarte existentialism – I GUESS SO, THOUGH THEY'RE BOTH SUSPICIOUS OF THE IDEA OF FIND HOPE IN OTHER PEOPLE, I GUESS, WHERE BARRON'S WORK HAS AN ALMOST NAÏVE HUMANISM TO IT.

An interrogation of transmutation and chaos is present in the way contemporary weird writers such as Kiernan and Barron exploit Lovecraftian topoi. Indeed, the motifs actually enable radical and incisive critiques. The topos of degeneration returns, but it is no longer primarily concerned with miscegenation or evolutionary reversion. Instead, in Kiernan's 'Houses Under the Sea', a subsidiary element of the topos's original incarnation is brought to the fore: a mixture of fear and exuberance at the idea of becoming Other. And the topos of the collapse of science/occult binary comes back, but it is no longer focussed on terror or awe at the suggestions of the cosmologies of the abstract sciences. Instead, in Barron's 'The Forest', it is used to explore the human implications of the revelation of the world-without-us, of the occulted world, of Vastation, and of the depredated environment.

The works of Lovecraft and his predecessors were largely concerned with the vast gulfs of time and space opened up by the new abstract sciences, and largely orientated outwards at an alienating and meaningless cosmos. But writers of the early twenty-first century have discovered that the themes and motifs of these fictions are surprisingly malleable. These writers are confronted, in a way that writers of the Haute Weird were not, by the transmutation of the human and by the occulted world; the possibility of an augmented and transformed humanity, and the damage rapid, unchecked technological advancement has wrought upon our biosphere, have revealed capabilities of the human and catastrophic aspects of the world that were previously hidden. As Stableford writes, in his essay, 'The cosmic horror' (2007), Haute Weird tropes have been transformed by the contemporary era, in which 'cosmic horror is impotent to resist the imaginative antidotes offered by contemporary science fiction.'⁶⁷ This is because, though 'the prospect of wholesale transfiguration is not without its own horrific potential, the horror in question is not cosmic – indeed, it is more intimate than the traditional sources of horror.'⁶⁸

Weird fiction has been found to be an incisive form of ideological critique of these conditions, its themes and tropes no longer orientated outward, or only outward, at a cosmos indifferent or hostile to humanity, but also inward at the crossings of borders forced upon us by our changing bodies, by the revelation of the world-without-us. By becoming-Other than Lovecraft, by taking on and radically transforming his topoi, rather than rejecting or transcending them, just as he himself took those topoi from earlier writers and violently refashioned them, Kiernan and Barron have maintained fidelity to Noys's Lovecraft event. In doing so, they have found a vatic imaginative space in which to confront the posthuman and the abjected world-in-itself, the transformations humanity and the world are going through, and think through their implications.

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¹ Benjamin Noys, 'The Lovecraft Event', (unpublished conference paper, 2007), https://www.academia.edu/548596/The_Lovecraft_Event [Date accessed: 24th November 2016], *passim*.

² Ibid, p. 3.

³ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Annotated Supernatural Horror in Literature*, ed. and with an introduction and commentary by S.T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2013 (1927)), Kindle edition, unpaginated.

⁴ Noys, 'The Lovecraft Event', pp. 3, 7.

⁵ Ibid, *passim*.

⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

⁷ James Machin, '*Determined to be Weird*': *British Weird Fiction before Weird Tales* (unpublished PhD thesis, 2016), p. 9.

⁸ China Miéville, 'Weird Fiction', in Mark Bould, *et al* (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), pp. 510-515, p. 510.

⁹ Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, 'Introduction', in Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (eds), *The Weird: A compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (London: Corvus, 2011), pp. xv-xx, p. xx.

¹⁰ Jeff VanderMeer, 'Moving Past Lovecraft', *WeirdFictionReview.com* (2012), <http://weirdfictionreview.com/2012/09/moving-past-lovecraft> [Date accessed: 21st December 2016].

¹¹ Alison Flood, 'World Fantasy award drops HP Lovecraft as prize image', *The Guardian* (2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/09/world-fantasy-award-drops-hp-lovecraft-as-prize-image> [Date accessed: 23rd December 2016].

¹² Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (eds), *The Weird: A compendium of Strange and Dark Stories* (London: Corvus, 2011), p. 896.

¹³ Indeed, as Kiernan explains in her preface, 'Looking for Innsmouth', to the book the story was collected in, *To Charles Fort with Love* (2005), it, along with other tales in the volume, was in part inspired by Kiernan having seen a strange figure standing on a New England shoreline she thought might be one of Lovecraft's Deep Ones risen from the depths (Caitlín R. Kiernan, 'Author's Preface: "Looking for Innsmouth"', in *To Charles Fort with Love* (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2005), pp. 11-20).

¹⁴ VanderMeer (eds), *The Weird*, p. 1044.

¹⁵ This allusion is not gratuitous; in his essay, 'Literature and Life', Deleuze discusses Lovecraft's oeuvre as an exemplar of literary becoming, suggestive of a radical flight (Gilles Deleuze, 'Literature and Life', in *Essays Clinical and Critical*, trans Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 1-6, p. 1).

¹⁶ It might seem that this sense of the continuity of tropes is in tension with the idea of the Lovecraft event as a rupture. But Lovecraft's reworking and combining of these tropes is radical and produces a break (and Kiernan's and Barron's own reworkings of Lovecraftian themes are violent enough to constitute rupturous events themselves).

¹⁷ Brian Stableford, *Glorious Perversity: The Decline and Fall of Literary Decadence* (Rockville: Wildside Press, 2006), p. 132.

¹⁸ H.P. Lovecraft, 'The Shadow Over Innsmouth', in S.T. Joshi (ed.), *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin, 1999 (1936)), Kindle edition, pp. 268-335, p. 335.

¹⁹ It has been argued, by the Lovecraft critic, S.T. Joshi, that the 'change of heart' of the narrator of 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' at the close of the tale is intended as 'an augmentation of the horror,' which shows that 'not merely his physical body but his mind has been ineluctably corrupted' (S.T. Joshi, *A Subtler Magick: The Writings and Philosophy of H.P. Lovecraft* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2016 (1982), unpaginated). This is a

convincing claim, but it does not detract from the fact that, regardless of what was intended, there is a hint of ecstasy in the tale's conclusion for future writers to exploit. This brings home the point that fidelity to the Lovecraft event does not necessarily involve any measure of faithfulness to Lovecraft's intentions.

²⁰ Caitlín R. Kiernan, 'Houses Under the Sea', in Ellen Datlow (ed.), *Lovecraft Unbound* (Milwaukee: Dark Horse Books, 2009), pp. 161-193, p. 189.

²¹ Ibid, p. 193.

²² Ibid, p. 186.

²³ Ibid, p. 182.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus (Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 2. Mille Plateaux)*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004 (1980)), p. 270.

²⁵ Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari cite the Lovecraftian 'nameless horror' as a key instance of the anomalous in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Ibid, p. 270).

²⁶ This theme can be seen in much of Kiernan's work.

²⁷ John A. Lester, *Journey Through Despair 1880-1914: Transformations in British Literary Culture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 29.

²⁸ Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy: 1870-1901*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 202.

²⁹ H.P. Lovecraft, 'The Dreams in the Witch House' in S.T. Joshi (ed.), *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin, 2004 (1933)), Kindle edition, pp. 300-334, p. 300.

³⁰ Laird Barron, 'The Forest', in *Occultation and Other Stories* (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2010), Kindle edition, pp. 5-32, p. 5.

³¹ Barron's insect colony recalls the 'mighty beetle civilisation' of Lovecraft's 'The Shadow Out of Time' (1936), which we are told will rise after the human race has died out (H.P. Lovecraft, 'The Shadow out of Time', in *The Dreams in the Witch House*, pp. 335-397, p. 360).

³² Ibid, p. 16.

³³ Ibid, p. 15.

³⁴ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet: Horror of Philosophy, vol 1*. (Alresford, Hants: Zero Books, 2011), Kindle edition, p. 76.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 77.

- ³⁶ Ibid, p. 77.
- ³⁷ Ibid, p. 79-80.
- ³⁸ Ibid, p. 80.
- ³⁹ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day - Volume 2: The Modern Gothic* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 196-197.
- ⁴⁰ Kiernan, 'Houses Under the Sea', p. 193.
- ⁴¹ Barron, 'The Forest', p. 15.
- ⁴² Ibid, p. 25.
- ⁴³ Ibid, p. 27.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 27.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 27.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 28.
- ⁴⁷ John Clute, *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror* (Cauheegan, Wisconsin: Payseur & Schmidt, 2006), p. 148.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 149.
- ⁴⁹ Barron, 'The Forest', p. 29.
- ⁵⁰ Clute, *The Darkening Garden*, p. 95.
- ⁵¹ Barron, 'The Forest', p. 22, emphasis in the original.
- ⁵² Ibid, p. 30.
- ⁵³ Ibid, p. 31.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 32.
- ⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection*), trans Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 (1980)), p. 9.
- ⁵⁶ Barron, 'The Forest', p. 32.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 32.
- ⁵⁸ Clute, *The Darkening Garden*, p. 148.
- ⁵⁹ Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet*, pp. 1-8.
- ⁶⁰ Barron, 'The Forest', p. 25.
- ⁶¹ Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet*, pp. 16-17, 16.
- ⁶² Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010).

⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science (Die fröhliche Wissenschaft)*, trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1974 (1882)), p. 274.

⁶⁴ Noys, 'The Lovecraft Event', p. 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 13.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 14.

⁶⁷ Brian Stableford, 'The cosmic horror', in S.T. Joshi (ed.), *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares, Volume 1* (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), pp. 65-96, p. 91.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 91.